https://www.financial-planning.com/news/how-advisors-can-serve-clients-who-are-new-widows-or-widowers

How advisors can best serve clients who are new widows or widowers

By Rob Burgess
August 02, 2024, 5:10 p.m. EDT

As a widower, Daniel M. Kopp is well acquainted with grief.

In 2017, when he was 31 years old, his wife, Sarah, died.

Now, the firm he founded, Wise Stewardship Financial Planning in Lakewood Ranch, Florida, focuses on serving young widows, many of them Gold Star widows. (He is also an Air Force veteran.)

Kopp said many widowed clients came to him after firing their previous financial advisor, most of whom were men. He said it's common in these situations that the advisor who was let go never worked to build a strong relationship with the wife.

This type of story is all too common and is why financial advisors who have experience dealing with widows and widowers say it's important to develop a relationship with both spouses from the outset, long before an unexpected death.

"The spouse who is more engaged in their finances may be the first to die," said Carla Adams, founder and financial advisor at Ametrine Wealth in Lake Orion, Michigan.

Planning for the inevitable

David Flores Wilson, the managing partner of Sincerus Advisory in New York, said while many couples divide up household responsibilities for the sake of efficiency, his firm insists on participation from both spouses in financial planning meetings.

Also, if the death wasn't a sudden one, that opens up the possibility of planning for this eventuality.

Ideally, discussions about beneficiary designations, asset ownership and legal documents should occur while both spouses are still living, said Jon McCardle, president of Summit Financial Group of Indiana in Lafayette, Indiana.

"Proactive planning can mitigate potential issues after a spouse's passing, ensuring a smoother transition for the surviving partner," he said.

The first meeting after a loss

Patience is required, Adams said, as the grieving spouse may not be able to process or store information the way they normally. They may experience gaps in

their memory. Keeping things simple as possible by dividing tasks into "now," "soon" and "later" can help these clients.

"They can easily feel overwhelmed by all of the tasks and seemingly irrationally get hyper-focused on things that are not at all urgent," she said.

Wilson said taking care of practical matters in the immediate days and weeks after the loss should be prioritized. Advisors can help make phone calls to the Social Security Administration, the life insurance carrier, their estate attorney and the deceased spouse's human resources department, if they were still working.

The first meeting with a new widow or widower should focus on empathy and support rather than an "official" agenda, unless an urgent matter requires immediate attention, said Joe Petry, founder and financial planner at Mayfair Financial in Kirkwood, Missouri.

Petry said in the first few months after a loss, he suggests the client bring a trusted friend or family member into any financial discussions.

Glenn J. Downing, founder and principal of CameronDowning in Miami, said he recommends advisors refrain from pushing a grieving spouse to make any major financial decisions for at least a year.

"Toward the end of that year the bereaved will have a sense of how life will move forward, and then will likely be in a better frame of mind to address financial issues," he said. "As with any bereavement, the best anyone can do in the short term is express sympathy and be available. But if big decisions can wait, then let them wait."

What to say, and what not to say

During his grieving process, Kopp said he became exhausted with the cliché, "I'm sorry for your loss."

"People mean well when they say it, but it is so overused," he said. "Instead say, 'I'm so sad for your loss.' I speak from personal and client experience there."

Asking the bereaved spouse about how they're feeling in the moment "normalizes the roller coaster of grief and implies that it can be different day to day or even moment to moment," said Kopp.

"Give space for tears," he said. "Say things like, 'All your emotions are welcome here.' Be a fellow human. Sit in the silence as necessary. Mourn together."

If the advisor can be with the client in their darkest hours, "You can earn not just that client for life but all the other widows she will come into contact with," said Kopp.

"This is a human business at the end of the day, and widows are looking for a special kind of human financial advisor to help," he said.

Helping clients through painful moments is where the ability to listen pays off, said Jason Weckerly, owner of Montgomery Wealth Managementin Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

"This is why we're here," he said. "This is where we earn our stripes."